

## Herbert Hoover: a Public Life

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## Book Reviews

Michael D. Gibson, Book Review Editor

*Herbert Hoover: A Public Life*, by David Burner. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1979. pp. xii, 433. Preface, sources, notes, acknowledgements, index, photographs. \$15.95.

New insights into the public life and service of Herbert Hoover that sharply challenge accepted myths are provided in David Burner's biography of the much maligned thirty-first president. The persistence of these myths can be largely attributed to intellectual biases, the mistaken assumption that Hoover was an arch conservative, and the fact that Hoover's personal papers were not available for research prior to 1963.

During the last decade a new generation of historians, including Joan Hoff Wilson, Ellis Hawley, and William Appleman Williams, have used the Hoover Papers to produce articles and books which have provided new appreciations of Hoover's public philosophy and the Hoover presidency. Burner, while remaining objective and detached, marshalls an impressive body of proof that Hoover was an active, progressive-minded chief executive.

As Secretary of Commerce during the 1920s, Hoover had led in the promotion of many progressive reforms. He tried to interest Coolidge in federally sponsored old age pensions; pushed for tax reform that would place heavier taxes on large income and inheritances; and was one of the prime movers in abolishing the twelve-hour day in the steel industry. Republican leaders of the Old Guard were outraged and desperately tried to prevent his nomination in 1928.

Hoover also made enemies in certain business and financial circles by repeatedly urging, from 1925 onward, that the Federal Reserve Board take firm measures to discourage stock market speculation. The ominous implications of this antagonism were not immediately apparent, but they foreshadowed a lack of cooperation which was to plague the administration, literally, into its final hours.

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One of Hoover's first actions as president, two days after inauguration, was to meet with Federal Reserve officials to explore ways of curbing speculation. The president also sent Henry M. Robinson to warn the larger banks, hoping to solicit pledges of restraint. In May he appealed to the president of the New York Stock Exchange and to governor Franklin D. Roosevelt to regulate and reform market practices. Neither had responded when the crash came in October.

Later, speaking from the advantage of hindsight, critics would point to Hoover's hesitancy in adopting massive relief programs at an early point in his administration. Nevertheless, the president's response was immediate and precedent shattering. For the first time the federal government intervened directly in a financial crisis. A conference of labor, financial, and industrial leaders was convened and agreed to four principles: no strikes, no wage cuts, the adoption of work sharing whenever possible, and employers would take care of their employees as best they could. The Federal Farm Board, which Hoover had been instrumental in creating, bought agricultural products to maintain price levels and made crop production loans.

Later would come a moratorium on international debts and administration-sponsored legislation to establish a Home Loan Bank Board and the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. After initial resistance by an obstructionist, politically motivated Congress, most of these measures were continued and expanded during the New Deal. In 1974 Rexford Tugwell, one of FDR's most visionary planners, would acknowledge that "We didn't admit it at the time, but practically the whole New Deal was extrapolated from programs that Hoover started."

If this is so, why did Hoover "fail" and what were the nature of his failings? One of Burner's more interesting contributions is his attempt to assess the effect of Hoover's unique background and experiences on the conduct of his administration. Interesting insights into Hoover's hesitancy to adopt more dramatic measures at an earlier date are offered.

Burner points to an over reliance on voluntarism—local efforts to provide jobs and basic necessities—as one of the keys to understanding the administration's "failure." Another key concerns Hoover's personality and the Quaker ethic that shaped it. Hoover recognized the importance of reassuring the public; but his Quaker upbringing prevented him from any unseemly attempts at self-promotion, rendering his attempts to rouse public confidence colorless and psychologically ineffective.

This reading of the Quaker influence and its impact deserves further

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exploration. Unfortunately, the concluding chapter, in which many loose ends might have been brought together, does not adequately come to grips with this or any of the other paradoxical elements in Hoover's personality, public philosophy and service. Even so, Burner makes some significant contributions in suggesting an approach that is useful in interpreting Hoover's response to the depression, and in providing many intriguing points of departure for more thorough studies of a crucial presidency.

Hoover's belief in voluntarism and the mobilization of local efforts to provide relief may have been overly naive; but it must also be seen as proceeding from his world war experiences with the growth of giant bureaucracies and his resulting concern for the future. He was convinced that large-scale dependence on government assistance could not be discarded once the crisis had passed. As historian William Appleman Williams has pointed out: "Hoover told us that if we (the neighbors of the stricken) cannot be roused to provide such help, and the way the government helps them . . . is not handled *very* carefully . . . there will be hell to pay . . . bureaucratic stateism that would devalue the human beings it claims to save . . . We now know these were legitimate fears."

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*Order upon the Land: The U.S. Rectangular Land Survey and the Upper Mississippi Country*, by Hildegard Binder Johnson. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976. pp. 268. Illustrations, maps, notes, \$9.00.

Hildegard Binder Johnson, for many years a distinguished professor of historical geography at Macalester College, has poured years of research and thought into this tight (242 pages of text) monograph on the upper Mississippi Country. The scene is that stretch of hills and valleys on either side of the Great River from Clinton (Iowa) to within sight of Minneapolis-St. Paul. Narrow at its southern and northern points, it is up to 140 miles in the vicinity of Madison (Wisconsin), and includes portions of the present states of Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. The themes are the nature and texture of the land, and the impact of the rectangular survey system on the patterns of settlement and economic exploitation. The author writes of the book's

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